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Boy Shoes

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Assigned in ENG 101: English Composition (Dr. Jeffrey Schultz)

To read the research paper that inspired Boy Shoes, visit digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/ for online content

“Gender is a source of identity for many people.” I stare at this sentence with my finger hovering over the delete key. After the third time reading this sentence back to myself, I check the alarm clock on my desk – 5:34 AM. The deadline for my final paper is two hours away, and though I know I shouldn’t be caught up on the introduction of my 25-page research paper, I can’t seem to finish it. Though this paper is supposed to answer questions about gender, the longer I spend writing it the more complexity I find in the topic. Additionally, the longer I spend without sleep the harder it is for me to concentrate.

“Gender is a source of identity for many people.” I linger over the words. It is neither the phrasing of the sentence nor the lack of complex vocabulary that is preventing me from moving on; I am not sure if this sentence is true. In my early childhood, this statement was not true for me. I was the boy my dad always wanted. He prayed for three sons, and so in turn, he got three daughters. By the time I, the third girl, came out, my father had ceased his prayers and decided to work with what he had been given. He signed me up for a baseball team and dressed me in pants that zipped off at the knees. I had an awkward haircut that resembled a mushroom and always wore camouflage. But I absolutely loved it. I played kickball at recess while the other girls in the fourth grade pretended to be kittens, and I boastfully held the title of Champion Arm-Wrestler in my class. Looking back on my younger years, the only thing I regret is not following my mom’s advice to wear a much-needed bra until the 7th grade.

When I needed to get ready for school, my mom would already be at work, and thus my dad helped assemble my outfits all throughout elementary school. Though my mom loved spending time with my sisters and me, her job stole her away from 7 AM to 8 PM. My dad worked very flexible hours, so in addition to arranging my wardrobe, he cooked us dinner, picked us up from school, and brushed our hair. My dad’s painful hair brushing was the reason I got my easy-to-maintain mushroom haircut. My dad often didn’t know

what he was doing, but my sisters and I enjoyed his attempts and would pretend to like his food concoctions (i.e., the fried rice with sugar, the hybrid meatloaf-spaghetti casserole, and the grilled cheese lasagna, which was surprisingly edible).

Growing up, I didn’t know about traditional gender roles because they never had a place in my home. My parents were equal partners that assumed different roles according to the needs of each circumstance. My mother taught me about independence and fearlessness. My father taught me about sacrifice and having the courage to try new things. As I got older, I began to notice that my family did not look the same as most of my friends’ families. I hardly ever saw my friend’s fathers; their moms would be the ones to build us forts during sleepovers and cook us banana pancakes in the morning.

It is now 5:59 in the morning according to my alarm clock. If I keep getting lost in my thoughts like this, I am never going to finish this paper. I catch my reflection in the mirror that sits behind my laptop. The bags under my eyes cast small shadows onto my cheeks, and my disheveled hair has half fallen out of my bun. Sometimes I wish I had kept my short hair; even though it was an awful bowl cut, at least it wasn’t a hassle to deal with. I still don’t act like most girls my age, so why look like them? Now I wear skirts instead of the zipper pants, but even in college the majority of my friends are men. The Polaroid my best friend, Joe, gave me for Christmas still sits on my desk leaning against my cup of pens. The glossy picture of us with our surfboards has a yellow tinge from my overheated lamp. The bottom of the picture reads, “Surf bros are better than hoes.” I realize this caption seems rude by simultaneously calling me a man and calling other women hoes, but that is the kind of humor Joe and I share. I often wonder if my crude humor is a result of having mostly male friends. I wonder what other things are different about me because I spend so much time with guys. I know it has affected the way people speak about me; people have described me to others as a “bro” and a “real homie.” Though I used to take much

pride in calling myself a tomboy, now I find it off-putting that I only thought of myself as tough because I viewed myself as “one of the boys.” I was strong if I was like the boys in my elementary school. I was logical if I wasn’t emotional like the girls in my high school.

The top right corner of my laptop reads 6:11 AM. My cursor blinks at the end of the sentence beneath the heading, “Introduction.” I have saved my introduction for last, as Professor Stevens taught me, but I cannot bring myself to continue writing. As my title states, my paper is about “Perceiving Sex in Text Messages.” The core of my paper is about whether people can tell someone’s sex by solely looking at their text messages. For my study, I sent out a survey containing screenshots of text messages and asked people to guess the sexes of the people texting. Out of 108 responses, 82% of the time people were correct. My professor was ecstatic when I told her the results of my survey, and I was too, at first. But then I began writing my final paper and found it difficult to draw conclusions from my study.

I based my study off of Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Theory, which states that masculine and feminine communication should be viewed as two unique categories and male-female interactions should be viewed as cross-cultural communication (Griffin, 2011). If taken to the extreme, this theory contends that men and women speak entirely different languages. If there is a miscommunication between two people of different sexes, the fact that they have distinct communication patterns could have caused the conflict.

When I first learned about this theory last semester, I was both intrigued and offended. I had noticed that most of my female friends used more hand gestures than my male friends, and my male friends swore more, which supported the theory. But Tannen also based her theory off of the large assumption that all males are masculine and all females are feminine. But as I learned from Cameron’s book, *Gender and the English Language*, gender is independent of sex. While someone’s sex is physically determined from birth, they are not born with a certain gender; gender is determined by a socially and psychologically created culture (Cameron, 2006). A society creates the standard for masculinity and femininity, and these standards describe how a person thinks, behaves, and communicates based on their gender. But a person’s gender may not agree with their sex. If I look at my childhood or

even now in my almost-adulthood, my gender does not always correlate with my sex.

My alarm clock flashes 6:32 AM in red numbers. This writer’s block is becoming seriously frustrating. This whole project has become frustrating. At the beginning of my study, I wanted to have the respondents answer questions about the gender of the people texting in the screenshots rather than their sex, but my professor advised against it. She told me the survey would be too complex if I tried to explain the concept of gender and how it can conflict with sex, and that it would confuse my participants and skew the results. In addition, she told me to pick screenshots that included the communication traits specific to each sex. For example, my previous research found that men send short messages and women use more emoticons, so I chose screenshots that showed these differences. The results of my survey were clear and supported my hypothesis, but my study really tested whether people knew the gender stereotypes within texting. This whole project seems redundant now — I conducted a study that showed people know the gender stereotypes that our society has created.

I originally chose this topic for my research paper because I thought it would be unique and interesting; however at this point in the semester it seems like every class I’m taking is discussing the social issues surrounding gender in our society. Even my least favorite class, Political Science, covered the topic of women in politics last week. My professor showed us a poll conducted by Gallup, CNN, and *USA Today* over several decades about the public opinion on voting for a woman president. The question used for polling in 2003 was as follows: “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be a woman, would you vote for that person?” (Gallup, CNN, and *USA Today* 2). The results of the study showed that more people answered yes to the question as years progressed, but the study’s question was merely hypothetical. My professor explained that the study’s results were heavily influenced by the social desirability effect, meaning the participants probably answered yes to the question not because they would vote for a woman president but because yes seemed like the “politically correct” answer. Even if someone’s actual opinion does not support a woman being president, they know they *should* say they support it.

Although I understood what my professor was

saying about social desirability creating false results in the poll, I could only focus on the question of the study: “a generally well-qualified person... who happened to be a woman.” Was this saying that well-qualified and woman are adjectives not usually embodied by the same person? Maybe that is a dramatization of the question, but the researchers still felt the need to specify that the woman candidate would in fact have respectable credentials. If the question were about a male candidate, I doubt the researchers would have specified that the man would be well-qualified—it would just be assumed. But maybe I was reading too much into it.

My clock now reads 6:49 AM. These tangents are not helping me finish this paper.

I decide to take a break and begin changing for work. I often become so consumed in my schoolwork that I just want to lie in a room and stare at the ceiling for hours, but working at Saint Joseph’s Preschool keeps me sane. Every Tuesday and Friday morning, I pile into a van with Jayelle, Diane, Caroline, and Melissa. As soon as our team walks through Saint Joseph’s doors, we dive into recess time with our kids. With the children’s imagination, the playground transforms into a volcano planet, a princess castle, and an underwater spider web.

Two weeks ago as I watched Philip lead a game of Stoplight, I was reminded of a book I found while doing research for my final paper. The book was titled *Voices: A Selection of Multicultural Readings*. In section three of her book, Kathleen S. Verderber (1995) examines how boys and girls learn the norms of communication by observing how children play. According to her book, girls play games that are collaborative, begin with a conversation to establish roles, and have no external rules. In contrast, boys play games that are meant to achieve a specific goal and have rigid rules. When boys communicate, it is for the sake of “emphasizing individuality and competition” (p. 21). Boys try to be in the spotlight and try to one-up each other.

Philip, who stood at the edge of the fake grass of the playground, began to yell at Nicolo who had been crawling instead of skipping. The rest of my Jumpstart team and I began to gravitate toward the commotion. “Nicolo!” Philip screamed. “I told you, this round is *skipping* not crawling. Everyone else was skipping like I said, why aren’t you? Do you know what skipping is? If you keep messing up Mateo and Alejandro are going

to win!”

Melissa and I looked at each other in disbelief. Jayelle could not contain her laughter. There was so much frustration and anger in such a little boy. I wondered why he was so upset. I wondered where he learned to yell like that.

My alarm clock snaps me out of my flashback as it begins to blare, and I run over to my desk to silence it. 7:00 AM. Why must my paper be due the same morning I have work? I just want to play with my kids. I am not sure if it’s my “maternal clocking” kicking in as they call it (whoever “they” are), but I have become more infatuated with the cuteness of the preschoolers. My phone is filled with pictures of Cole wearing his Finding Nemo jacket, Alvin climbing on my back, and Mateo camped out on my lap. Though I love scrolling through the picture to brag about my students to my friends, the photos cannot fully capture all of the memories I have made at Saint Joseph’s. Some memories were funny while others were awkward, and some situations were both. My Jumpstart team’s favorite thing to do on the van ride back to Pepperdine is to exchange funny anecdotes or stories about the most inappropriate things our kids say. Last month, I made my coworkers roll with laughter when I told them what happened with Mateo after recess.

One Tuesday as the class gathered for snack time, Mateo stumbled over and plopped down in front of me. He peered up at me, with his eyebrows scrunched and asked, “Why are you dressed like a girl today?”

I could not hide the shock on my face. “What do you mean?” I asked, more confused than offended. He climbed over my crisscrossed legs and touched the thin, laced headband in my hair.

I touched my hairband and looked down at him. “Because I am a girl,” I stated simply.

Mateo pulled his brows together and glared at me, “No you’re not.”

Unsure of how to respond and not looking to argue with a four year old, I awkwardly turned my attention to the rest of the class and Mateo eventually did the same.

The funniest part of the story is that this kept happening. Mateo continued to call me a boy for the next week, not in a teasing manner but as if he was trying to prove me wrong. When I asked him why he thought I was a boy, he scanned me from head to toe and said, “You have boy shoes.” I looked down at my black

slip-on shoes. They were covered with little plastic bumps that made them look glittered in the sunlight.

When I retold this story to my Jumpstart team, they burst out in laughter and shock. We all were required to wear the same uniform clothing. If anything, I wore the most makeup out of our team, and yet I was the one Mateo thought was a boy. As incidences like that repeated with Mateo, I stopped laughing about them. On the van rides back to Pepperdine, I started to brainstorm about how I could explain that I was a girl to Mateo. He was four years old, and I was pretty sure his parents would not appreciate me educating him about female anatomy when I was supposed to be teaching him the alphabet.

I wondered what Mateo's parents were like. Did his mother work all day like mine? Or was she the one making paper bag lunches for him and kissing him goodnight? His mom must be very feminine, I thought. I didn't want to jump to the conclusion that his confusion about my sex stemmed from being exposed to traditional gender roles, but that's the first explanation that came to mind. After all, my parents shaped the way I view gender.

I thought explaining to Mateo that I am a girl because I have long hair, but there were boys in Saint Joseph's Preschool with long hair. I wanted to say I am a girl because I wear makeup and skirts, but that wasn't the true way to describe what makes me female. Every explanation I came up with contained the gender stereotypes and roles I debated against in my political science class and wrote about in the previous research section of my communication paper. Discussing these social issues with my classmates and professors made gender and sex seem so simple, but I stood in front of Mateo so many times unable to formulate an explanation.

The backup alarm on my phone begins to sound. 7:15 AM. The sunlight begins to stream through the slats of my blinds, and I run my fingers across the mouse pad to wake up my laptop. I know what Professor Stevens would want me to write; I would start by establishing the importance of communication and gender, and then explain each gender's distinct communication style. But my fingers begin typing something else:

"Gender can be a source of identity for many people; their masculinity or femininity allows them to belong to a larger group of people who share common mannerisms

and traits. But one's sex does not determine one's gender, and these categories of stereotypical traits do not define a person."

I finish the introduction, proofread the procedures and results of my survey, and then pull up the website to submit my paper. I turn in my 25-page final at exactly 7:28 AM with 2 minutes to spare. I release a deep sigh of both relief and exhaustion. I close my laptop and go to the bathroom to brush my teeth. My freshmen year of college is coming to an end and today is my last day at Saint Joseph's Preschool. I honestly may cry as we get in the van and drive away for the last time; I will miss our little Jumpstart friends. Next year I will be studying abroad, and I will probably have an internship instead of working at Jumpstart my junior year. Unless by some stroke of luck, I bump into one of them as I walk the streets of Santa Monica, I may never see the children after today.

I imagine what Mateo will be like when he gets older: his shaggy light hair will probably darken and he will trade his Ninja Turtles clothes for fitted Polos. I hope he becomes the kind of guy who wears ironic t-shirts. One day, maybe he will be sitting behind his laptop until an ungodly hour, typing a final paper about how he once thought his Jumpstart teacher was a boy.

I don't know what I am going to say to him when I leave the classroom for the last time today. He doesn't give anyone hugs, but I may be able to squeeze one out of him. I place my wallet in my purse and check the time on my phone – 7:34 AM. I am going to be late. I turn off my desk lamp, put on my boy shoes, and walk to the parking lot to meet my Jumpstart team.

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